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JEAN FRANCOIS MILLET
PAINTER OF LABOUR. XII SCENES.
WITH INTRODUCTION AND NOTES
BY C. H. COLLINS BAKER

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PAINTER OF LABOUR. XII SCENES
WITH INTRODUCTION AND NOTES
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The badge on the cover has been designed by
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INTRODUCTION

‘Cursed is the ground for thy sake; in sorrow shalt thou eat of it all the days of thy life.

‘In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return.’

LE Cri de la Terre,’ said Millet, ‘was uttered long before my time,’ yet he was the first painter to express the reality of peasant life and labour. Others had observed with amusement and cynical interest the manners and debaucheries of Dutch and Flemish boors. But their attitude had been that of professional artists from the town, seeking good material and local colour among people from whom they themselves were consciously distinct, and whose antics were their only *raison-d'être*. Not even the great Brueghel realized the lot of peasants with sympathy and compassionate understanding; as playgoers, rather, the Dutch and Flemish predecessors of Millet had enjoyed the loutish customs of the people. But Millet fills

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the double rôle played by the greater artists: he not only himself shares the life of those he paints, but also he interprets to us its profound and universal significance for humanity in the language of great art. He saw labour and the curse laid on the earth not only as one whose soul the predestined sorrow filled, but also with the constructive understanding that extracts fundamental truths from a crowded mass of facts and relates them to the large issues and deep springs of life.

In translating the actions of field labourers and voicing their appeal by means of an art so jealously guarded as painting in the early years of last century, Millet was shockingly daring. It is true that Greuze not many years before had charmed and touched the fashionable world of Paris and Versailles with pictures of simple life and rustic virtue; but his villagers, staged and grouped in the postures of the decayed Roman School and honeyed with Greuze's special kind of sensuality, bore the same relation to life as the chorus in a comic opera. In this way his alleged rustic pictures preserved the Classic spirit required of serious artists in those days and conformed with the canon of Ideal Beauty. His peasants all had classic profiles and admirable complexions; their hands were clean and plumply soft, the virtuous maidens' dresses were

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alluring and coquettish. Nothing so common as the sweat of toil nor so disquieting as the callousness of nature disturbed his pictures' charm. And then when Greuze with all his kind was swept away by the uprising of the People against the Aristocrats, we note that the Revolution produced at once no art reflecting the changed thought and values of that molten society. • Modern life was the last thing that David and his great follower Ingres would have prostituted art by painting. Nor, on the other hand, was the • Romantic movement of Géricault and Delacroix much more fruitful than the Classical in touching the deep issues and new values of modern thought.

Historians discern in the gradual awakening and self-assertion of labour the most pregnant event of these last fifty years. Fifty years ago when Millet painted his 'Man with a Hoe,' Industry was almost inarticulate, though many champions from the higher social classes had already seen its wrongs and taken up its cause. A hostile critic of this picture wrote that 'By creating a misplaced pity for the hard lot of the peasantry it breathes a spirit of revolt,' and the more distrustful of Millet's censors did not scruple to charge him with Socialism. Trivial criticism as this is, it reminds us that Millet, himself a peasant, who in all his life had nothing but

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the fields in mind, who would not tell, lest he should prove wearisome, 'all that he had seen and heard and felt,' was the first artist to reveal to a derisive world the dignity of uncouthness, the patient heroism and sorrow of those who battle with the earth. Thus artistically and socially he was a pioneer. Artistically because until he extended the horizon Beauty was supposed to reside exclusively in classic or romantic-historical themes, and art was judged to have no business with ordinary life; socially because he was one of the first children of toil to voice the burden and tragedy of their tribe. Who, indeed, can calculate how deeply Industry is in Millet's debt for the now general recognition of its claims?

Sentimental commentators of Millet have perhaps strained the truth, introducing a moralizing tendency into his resolute acceptance of the inevitability of life. They find his pictures doctrinal, reading into them their own gloomy propaganda. Thus his 'Vinedresser' and his 'Hoeman' are interpreted as types of industrial oppression, as symbols of betrayed humanity and degraded, downtrodden man. We must recognize, however (leaving aside the fact that any smell of moralizing or propaganda would have corrupted Millet's art), that he read life too deeply and with too comprehensive an under-

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standing to become embroiled in relatively transient controversy. His people are not the victims of mortal capitalists, nor the products of man's sweating greed and feverish competing. Rather are they the natural inheritors of that age-long and inevitable struggle with elemental forces, and an integral part of a great Nature. His own oft-quoted letter, in answer to some critic's charge that he had invented the rumour that the world was not invariably a pleasant, easy place, shows that he was as little hampered by the sentimentalists' inability to face unpleasant facts as by an embittered creed. The glamour and the fairy loveliness of Nature, he wrote, were obvious to him; but that did not blind him to her suffering and tragedy. And in that beautiful and simple prose of his he strikes out a picture of the steaming plain and toiling beasts, and in a stony place a man 'tout éreiné' who painfully straightens himself up to breathe a moment. But, he adds, 'Le drame est enveloppé de splendeur. Ce n'est pas de mon invention; il y a longtemps que cette expression, "le cri de la Terre," est trouvée.'

Millet saw life as it is, its tenderness, romance and harshness, with the rare vision of great artists; with clear-eyed and compassionate comprehension discerning its universal value and residual significance. The grossness and animal

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mentality; the cruelty, meanness and degradation of low-developed man are not to his deep-seeing mind a vital characteristic. From all that he had seen and heard and felt he knew that the significant qualities in elemental man are his endurance and patient though unconscious hope; his massive rhythm of movement; his profound harmony with the life that has moulded him; his indestructible and mournful dignity. Labour as depicted by Millet is neither an attractive pastime (as light opera and sentimentalists suggest) nor a grievance in the revolt of working men against employers. It is rather an elemental condition imposed on man by God or Nature. The necessity for labour he knew to be relentless; he had no illusions as to the effects of unremitting toil. But equally he recognized the grandeur of a scheme in which on the one hand was the primal curse laid on the earth, and on the other man bearing the burden of his destiny, mute in his suffering, unbroken in endurance, gentle in his strength.

PLATES

1. Départ pour le travail.
2. L'Angelus.
3. Paysan greffant un arbre.
4. La mère et les enfants.
5. Famille de paysans.
6. Les scieurs de bois.
7. La femme au rouet.
8. Les bêcheurs.
9. Les glaneuses.
10. Les boucheronnes.
11. L'homme à la houe.
12. Le vigneron en repos.

Going to work

I. DEPART POUR LE TRAVAIL.

With an astonishing economy of means, relying on the whole action of his figures rather than on facial expression, Millet manifests in this picture a depth of tenderness and romance that conclusively rebuts the old criticism that he only saw the harshness of life. In a way especially his own he charges the landscape and the sunlight of dawn with the sentiment of his figures. The subtlety of Millet's drawing is illustrated in the fine shades of feeling suggested in this couple. Their limbs seem to take them mechanically along, while their minds are absorbed by the eternal call of youth to youth. In the radiance of the early sunlight and under the spell of this emotion they touch a height to which perhaps they will never again attain in the cycle of their toil-conditioned lives. The man will perchance become the Man with the Hoe, the girl a gaunt woman numbed by constant drudgery. But once they knew the deep wonder and promise of morning. With equal truth and restraint Millet expresses the glamour or the utter disillusionment and fatigue of the peasant's life.



2. L'ANGELUS.

By its sensational adventures in sale rooms 'L'Angelus' has become the most famous of Millet's masterpieces. It is safe to say that no great picture is better known and more badly treated in reproduction. It was exhibited in the Salon of 1859; its sale price has varied from £40 to £32,000, it has been to America and back, finally to rest in the Louvre with the noble Chauchard Gift. Apart from the simple and touching piety of its conception it is one of the most honest pictures in the world. At the time of its appearance such absence of theatricality, conscious elegance and affectation must have been almost shocking to a public used to the kind of prayer pictures bequeathed by Carlo Dolce. The girl, true to Nature, falls easily into the attitude of prayer; the man, equally devout, stands awkwardly. As in 'Les Glaneuses,' Millet uses the perspective of the land to intensify the feeling of his figures. Quite unconscious of our gaze, and subtly knit together by their bond of labour, they stand in a wonderful solitude. Their very isolation in the vast stillness of the empty plain expresses the spontaneity of their instinctive and unwitnessed reverence.



3. PAYSAN GREFFANT UN ARBRE.

One of the most charming of Millet's series of peasant life is this 'Paysan greffant un Arbre,' of 1855, two years before 'Les Glaneuses.' Almost the first success he gained with his Barbizon pictures, it was surreptitiously bought out of the Salon for £160 by Rousseau. It has been said that Millet painted the life history of his peasants, from the cradle to the hour when the Shrouded Reaper plucks the old man from his toil. In this picture he touches with wonderful tenderness the quiet happiness of a peasant home. Security and contentment are the keynote of this scene, - in the absorbed attention of the grafter and the reposeful serenity of the mother. And for the baby one can say that in the whole field of art there are few inspirations as happy. Here we have a true idyll of peasant life.



4. LA MERE ET LES ENFANTS.

One of Millet's revolutionary views was that 'if a man finds any place or effect in Nature wanting in beauty, the lack is in his own heart.' We can hardly understand to-day how strange to his critics must have appeared Millet's choice of subject. That a man who had all classical history and all historical romance to choose from should paint a cottage woman crouching to feed her urchins from a common spoon must have seemed inexplicable. There lies the perpetual issue between great artists and their public. The latter come into court with settled views as to the unpaintable nature of certain subjects, the former demonstrate to the majority how blind their critics were. In this picture the actuality of the peasant home is conjured up with intimate tenderness; the scene is realized by one who shares the inmost life of the community.



5. FAMILLE DE PAYSANS.

The union and strength of the family are symbolized in this superb design. Strength is expressed by the powerful physique of these swarthy weather-hardened parents, and their union by the obvious yet happily spontaneous action of the child. To touch for a moment on technique: the idea of strength is reinforced by the masterly columnar lines of the design. No modern painter has excelled Millet in strength and simplicity of composition. His massive and austere style is sculpturesque in its solidity and static value; behind his apparently simple, almost accidental, arrangements of uncouth and sweat-stained labourers, mere clods and yokels in the eyes of the Classicists, is a scholarship of craft far greater than that of the professed grand-stylists.



6. LES SCIEURS DE BOIS.

Here man labours in the fullness of his strength, tireless, huge and dominating. The rhythm of movement that in its lithe vitality gives animal action a quality unreproduced by machinery is emphasized with mastery in this design. By now it has become a truism that a great draughtsman can convey the essential truth of motion to a degree impossible in instantaneous photography. These sawyers are a typical instance of such draughtsmanship, for their action is not arrested or frozen movement, as in a photograph, but unfolding. The movements that produced the momentary action and those that will, inevitably, the next instant come out of it, are here expressed. Thus is conveyed the flux of life.



7. LA FEMME AU ROUET.

Millet's peasant women bear no relation to the women of Brouwer or Teniers: they are the first of their kind to appear. For though women no doubt laboured in the fields and farms in their day, the Dutch and Flemish painters did not notice them. Nor is there any similarity of conception in Boucher's or Fragonard's shepherdesses and Millet's. And Chardin, who is more akin to Millet, hardly realized the humanity of his serving-women in the way that the more profound and personal character of this 'Woman at the Spinning Wheel' is understood. For a closer parallel with Millet's type of woman, we must turn to Rembrandt's Hendrijcke Stoffels, in whom we find the same resigned and contemplative calm, the same aspect of sorrow intimately known and silently endured. As a rule Millet's peasant women are not worn by toil; rather are they firmly and hardily conditioned to bear the labours of maternity and the land. 'La Femme au Rouet' is said to represent the artist's sister.



8. LES BECHEURS.

One of Millet's finest designs, this etching has a largeness of style and decorative purpose that would fit it to be enlarged to life-size. The spacing of the limbs, the emphasis given to rhythmic action and thrust-resisting lines are the outcome of profound science as well as of an instinct for great essentials. It seems improbable that the motif of this etching - the stubborn strength, the rude power of field labourers - will ever be better expressed pictorially. The character and life of these men is given us in this statement of, apparently, but a moment in their day. Their action and environment are made to carry a symbolic meaning; they typify a race of peasants. Thus Millet's work is monumental, giving once for all a general and enduring expression of peasant life and labour.



9. LES GLANEUSES.

The outcome of many experiments in design, 'The Gleaners' was exhibited in the 1857 Salon, eight years after Millet had settled at Barbizon. It typifies his single-minded purpose. Where a Greuze or his present-day followers would distract us by pretty faces and coquettish costumes, Millet has permitted no irrelevance. The faces of his women are barely to be guessed at, there is no allurements in their dress or figures. The simple necessity of gleaning, patiently accepted, was his theme, and between it and us no secondary issue comes. The perspective of the picture accentuates its motif; for where a popular harvest picture would have introduced some roguish by-play between the women and the harvesters, so that the business of gleaning was overlooked, here the gleaners toil unnoticed, the sense of their loneliness heightened by the remoteness of the farmer and his hands. This is no amorous opportunity for these women, but a back-breaking and precarious expedient. So hard yet natural is their necessity that resolutely through the burning day they work over the clean-raked fields, gleaning, as we see, here and there a single straw.



10. LES BUCHERONNES.

At first glance one might assign this painting to the movement associated with Cézanne and Degas. Indeed, it is not unlikely that that movement and its outcome originated in some such unpremeditated summary. Among Millet's pictures of women toiling this strikes perhaps the most dramatic note. He seems to have felt predominantly the monstrous burdens carried by these patient figures, old and young. The lighting of the picture may express a mood of despondency; there is certainly a hopeless resignation in the gloomy sky, the sickly pallor of the barren landscape, and the wan gleam striking on the figures. Yet crushing though their burdens be, these women carry them as a matter of course, absorbed by the demands of their work, quite without protest or conscious pathos.



II. L'HOMME A LA HOUE.

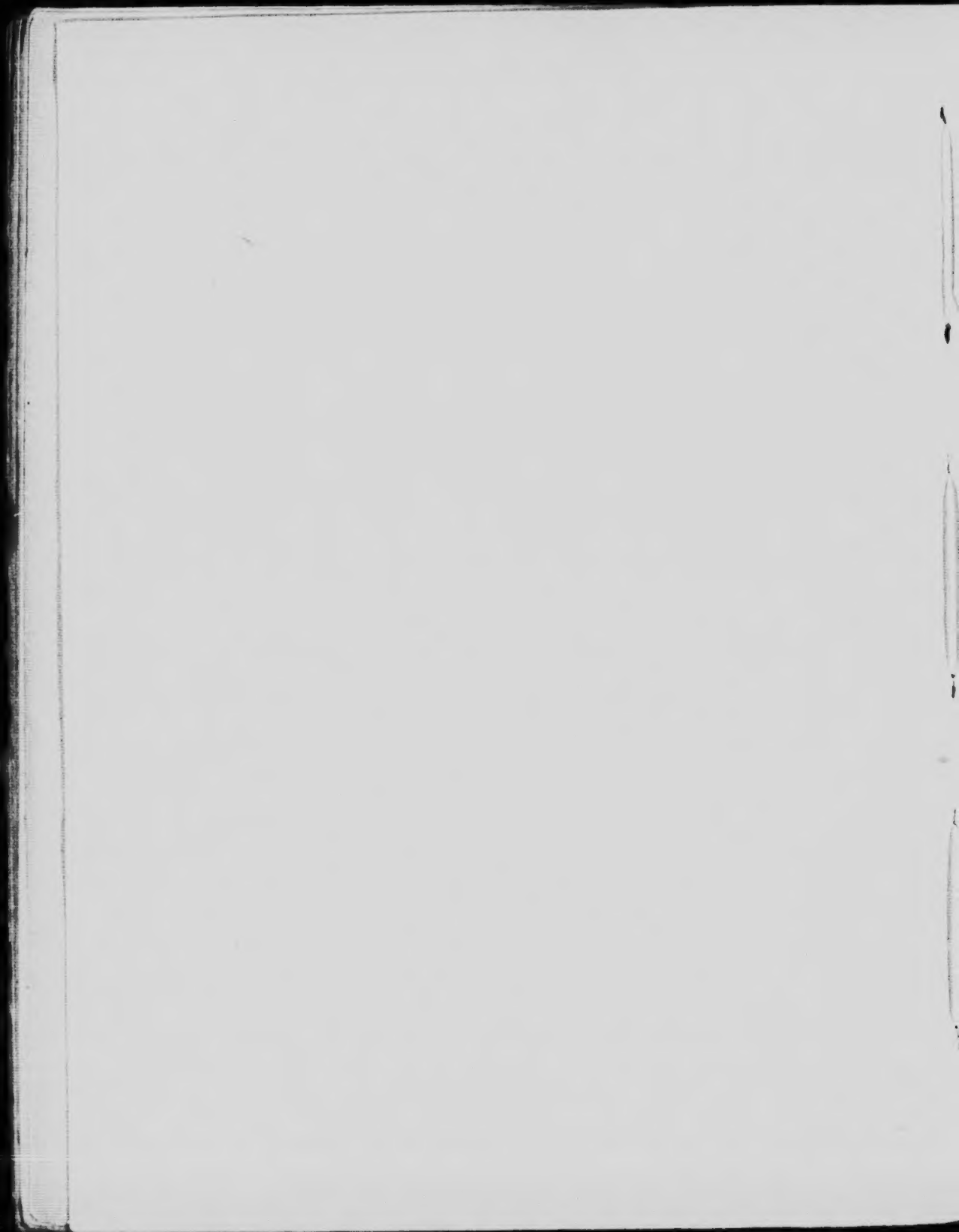
'The Man with the Hoe' has been taken to signalize Millet's revolt against social conditions. In this reading the figure is a 'symbol of betrayed humanity,' and a type of the awful degradation of man through endless, hopeless and joyless drudgery. He is a 'savage of civilization,' for whose ill-omened existence some landlord must be made responsible. It is very sure, however, that Millet encumbered his conception of this figure with no theoretical or political intention. For, after all, the man is impressive and explicable enough without our searching for an abstruse explanation, nor is there any evidence that he is a degraded type. Even the interpretation that this picture voices 'the intense agony of hope deferred' is denied by a stoic quality in the conception. The Hoeman, probably as much a portrait as a symbolic figure, is one of the truest documents in art, recording without bias but with wide comprehension one phase in man's struggle with the earth. As a conception of elemental man, bound to, moulded by and yet triumphing over the earth, this is Millet's supreme creation. His own comment on it was 'A man leaning on his hoe is more typical of work than a man actually hoeing. He shows that he has worked and been wearied out; that he recovers and will work again.' This is the obscure, unhonoured heroism of labour.



12. LE VIGNERON EN REPOS.

This pastel illustrates the closing phase of man's struggle with the earth. The resistance of youth and the reserves of physical strength have been broken down. Labour has become a burden, hope has ebbed. Once this man rejoiced in his strength, and his muscles took delight in rhythmic action. But at last the earth is gaining on him. Millet does not, however, rebel or protest; the result of this struggle was foreseen and naturally accepted. There is no pathos nor appeal for pity in this Resting Vinedresser. He is not conscious that he is an object for compassion; like an outworn horse at rest, he seems withdrawn into a dream state, with mind and body slackened in the respite gained. 'Le Vigneron' was painted in 1871.





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